

BRANDON SANDERSON



# Firstborn

Brandon Sanderson



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While safe aboard his flagship, there were two ways for Dennison to watch the battle.

The obvious method relied on the expansive battle hologram that dominated the bridge. The hologram was on at the moment, and it displayed an array of triangular blue blips representing fighters flying about waist-high. The much larger blue oval of Dennison's command ship hung a moderate distance above and behind the fighters. The massive and powerful but far less agile leviathan probably wouldn't see battle this day. The enemy's ships were too weak to damage its hull, but they were also too fast for it to catch. This would be a battle between the smaller fighters.

And Dennison would lead them. He rose from his command chair and walked a few steps to the hologram's edge, studying the enemy. Their red ships winked into existence as scanners located them amidst the rolling boulders of the asteroid field. Rebels in name but pirates in action, the group had thrived unhindered for far too long. It had been five years since his brother Varion had re-established His Majesty's law in this sector, and the rebellious elements should long since have been crushed.

Dennison stepped into the hologram, walking until he stood directly behind his ships. There were about two dozen of them—not a large force, by Fleet standards, but bigger than he deserved. He glanced to the side. Noncommissioned aides and lesser officers had paused in their duties, eyes turned toward their youthful commander. Though they offered no obvious disrespect, Dennison could see their true feelings in their eyes. They did not expect him to win.

*Well, Dennison thought, wouldn't want to disappoint the good folks.*

“Divide the squadrons,” Dennison commanded. His order was transmitted directly to the various captains, and his small fleet broke into four smaller groups. Ahead, the pirates began to form up as well—though they stayed within their asteroid-cover.

Through the movement of their ships, Dennison could feel their battle strategy taking shape. At his disposal was all the formal military knowledge that came with a high-priced Academy education. Memories of lectures and textbooks mixed in his head, enhancing the practical experience he'd gained during a half-dozen years commanding simulations and, eventually, real battles.

Yes, he could see it. He could see what the enemy commanders were doing; he could sense their strategies. And he *almost* knew how to counter them.

“My lord?” an aide said, stepping forward. She bore a battle-visor in her hands. “Will you be needing this?”

The visor was the second way a commander could watch the battle. Each fighter bore a camera just inside its cockpit to relay a direct view. Varion always wore a battle-visor. Dennison, however, was not his brother. He seemed to be the only one who realized that fact.

“No,” Dennison said, waving the aide away. The action caused a stir amongst the bridge team, and Dennison caught a glare from Brell, his XO.

“Send Squadron C to engage,” Dennison commanded, ignoring Brell.

A group of four fighters broke off from the main fleet, streaking toward the asteroids. Blue met red, and the battle began in earnest.

Dennison strode through the hologram, watching, giving commands, and analyzing—just as he had been taught. Dogfighting ships zipped around his head; fist-sized asteroids shattered as he walked through their space, then reformed after he had passed. He moved like some ancient god of lore, presiding over a battlefield of miniature mortals who couldn't see him, but certainly felt his almighty hand.

Except, if Dennison was a god, his specialty certainly wasn't war.

His education kept him from making any disastrous mistakes, but before long, the battle had progressed to the point where it was no longer winnable. His complete lack of pride let him order the expected retreat. The Fleet ships limped away, reduced in numbers by more than half. From the statistics glowing into hovering, holographic existence before him, Dennison could see that his ships had barely managed to destroy a dozen

enemy fighters.

Dennison stepped from the hologram, leaving the red ships victorious and the blue ships despondent. The hologram disappeared, its images shattering and dribbling to the command center's floor like shimmering dust, the pieces eventually burning away in the light. Crewmembers stood around the perimeter, their eyes showing the sickly shame of defeat.

Only Brell had the courage to speak what they were all thinking. "He really is an idiot," he muttered under his breath.

Dennison paused by the doorway. He turned with a raised eyebrow, and found Brell staring back unrepentantly. Another High Officer probably would have sent him to the brig for insubordination. Of course, another commander wouldn't have earned such disrespect in the first place. Dennison leaned back against the side of the doorway, arms folded in an un-militaristic posture. "I should probably punish you, Brell. I am a High Officer, after all."

This, at least, made the man look aside. Dennison lounged, letting Brell realize that—incompetent or not—Dennison had the power to destroy a man's career with a mere comm-call.

Dennison finally sighed, standing up and walking forward. "But, you know, I've never really believed in disciplining men for speaking the truth. Yes, Brell. I, Dennison Crestmar—brother of the Great Varion Crestmar, cousin to kings and commander of fleets—am an idiot. Just like all of you have heard."

Dennison paused, stopping right in front of Brell, then reached out and tapped the man's chest right in the center of his High Imperial Emblem. "But think of this," Dennison continued with a light smile. "If I'm an idiot, then you must be pretty damn incompetent yourself; otherwise they would never have wasted you by sending you to serve under me."

Brell's face flared red at the insult, but he showed uncharacteristic restraint by holding his tongue. Dennison turned and strolled from the room. "Prepare my speeder for my return to the Point," he commanded. "I'm due for dinner with my father tomorrow."

\* \* \*

He missed dinner. However, it wasn't his fault, considering he had to travel half the length of the High Empire. Dennison's father, High Duke Sennion Crestmar, was waiting for him in the spaceport when he arrived.

Sennion didn't say a word as Dennison left the airlock and approached. The High Duke was a tall man—proud, broad shouldered, with a noble face. He was the epitome of what a High Officer should be. At least Dennison had inherited the height.

The High Duke turned, Dennison fell into step beside him, and the two strode down the Officer's Walk—a pathway with a deep red carpet, trimmed with gold. It was reserved for High Officers, uncluttered by the civilians and lower ranks who bustled against each other on either side. There were no vehicles or moving

walkways on the Officer's Walk. High Officers carried themselves. There was strength in walking—or so Dennison's father always said. The High Duke was rather fond of self-congratulatory mottoes.

"Well?" Sennion finally asked, eyes forward.

Dennison shrugged. "I really tried this time, if it makes any difference."

"If you had 'tried,'" Sennion said flatly, "you would have won. You had superior ships, superior men, and superior training."

Dennison didn't bother trying to argue with Sennion. He had given up on that particular waste of sanity years ago.

"The High Emperor assumed that you simply needed practical experience," Sennion said, almost to himself.

"He thought that simulations and school games weren't realistic enough to engage you."

"Even emperors can be wrong, father," Dennison said.

Sennion didn't even favor him with a glare.

*Here it comes*, Dennison thought. *He's finally going to admit it. He's finally going to let me go.* Dennison wasn't certain what he'd do once he was released from military command—but whatever he chose to do, he couldn't possibly be any worse at it.

"I have arranged a new commission for you," Sennion finally said.

Dennison started. Then, he closed his eyes, barely suppressing a sigh. How many failures would the High Duke need to see before he gave up?

"It's aboard *The Stormwind*."

Dennison froze in place.

Sennion stopped, finally turning to regard his son. People streamed to either side on the lower walks, ignoring the two men in fine uniforms standing on the crimson carpet.

Dumbfounded, it took Dennison a moment to begin to respond. "But . . ."

"It's a fine ship—a good place to learn. You will serve as an adjutant and Squadron-commander for High Admiral Kern."

"I know it's a 'fine ship,'" Dennison said through clenched teeth. "Father, that is a real command on an Imperial flagship, not some idle playing in the Reaches. It's bad enough when I lose a dozen men fighting pirates. Need I be responsible for the deaths of thousands in the Reunification War as well?"

"I know Admiral Kern," Sennion said, ignoring his son's objections. "He is an excellent tactician. Perhaps he

will be able to help you with your...problems.”

“Problems?” Dennison demanded quietly. “Problems, father? Has it never even occurred to you that I’m just not any good at this? It isn’t dishonorable for the son of a High Duke to seek another profession, once he’s proven himself unsuited to command. Goodness knows, I’ve certainly satisfied *that* particular requirement.”

Sennion stepped forward, grabbing Dennison by the shoulders. “You will not speak that way,” he commanded. “You are not like other officers. The High Empire expects more. The High Empire *d demands* more!”

Dennison was taken aback by his father’s lack of formality, and some of the passers by stopped to regard the strange sight of a High Duke acting with such passion. Dennison stood within his father’s stiff grasp, reading the man’s eyes. *It isn’t the High Emperor, is it, father?* Dennison thought. *It’s you. One genius son isn’t enough. For you, one success and one failure simply cancel each other out.*

“Go prepare yourself,” Sennion said, releasing him. “*The Stormwind* is expecting your speeder in three days, and it’s a seventy-hour trip.”

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“With permission, Your Majesty, I don’t think this is the command for me,” Dennison said, kneeling before the speeder’s wallscreen.

The High Emperor was a middle-aged man with a firm chin and a full face. He was balding in a time when most men got scalp rejuvenations, but his refusal to enhance his appearance lent him a weight of . . . authenticity. He frowned at Dennison’s comment. “It is an enviable post, Dennison. Most young High Officers would consider it an amazing opportunity.”

“I am hardly like most young officers, Your Majesty,” Dennison noted.

“No, that you certainly are not,” the emperor said. “However, I would think that this post’s near proximity to your brother would interest you.”

Dennison shrugged. “To be honest, Your Majesty, I don’t know Varion. I’m curious about him, but no more so than another person might be. I maintain my Petition to be released from this commission.”

The emperor’s frown deepened. “You need to show more initiative, young Crestmar. Your pessimism has been a great annoyance to the High Throne.”

Dennison glanced down—it was always bad when the emperor switched to the third person. “Your Majesty,” he said. “I really have tried—I’ve tried all my life. But I received near-failing marks at the Academy, I never managed to even place in the games, and I’ve bungled every command given me. I’m just not any good.”

“You have it in you,” the emperor said. “You just have to try a little harder.”

Dennison groaned softly. The emperor had obviously been speaking with his father again. “How can you be so

sure, Your Majesty?”

“I just am. Your Petition is denied. Is there anything else?”

Dennison shook his head.

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Admiral Kern was not waiting for Dennison in the docking bay when he left the speeder, but that wasn't unusual. Though a High Officer, Dennison was still a junior one, and Kern was one of the most powerful admirals in the Fleet.

Dennison followed an aide through the flagship's passageways. They were surprisingly well-decorated for a warship, adorned with the twelve seals of the High Empire. This was an Imperial Flagship, designed to impress inside and out. The aide led him to a large, circular chamber with a battle hologram at its center. Though the air sparkled with miniature ships, only one man stood in the room—this wasn't the bridge, but a simulation chamber very similar to the ones Dennison had used at the Academy.

High Admiral Kern was young for one of his rank; he had a square face and thick dark hair. He was large enough that one could imagine him as some ancient general with a horse and broadsword, yet he had the typical reserved mien of an imperial nobleman. He didn't look away from his battle as Dennison entered. The edges of the room were dim, the only illumination coming from the illusory ships and the glowing ring that marked the hologram's edge. Kern stood at the center, not directing the progress, just observing. The aide left, closing the door.

“Do you recognize this battle?” the admiral suddenly asked.

Dennison walked forward. “Yes, sir,” he said, realizing with surprise that he did. “It's the battle of Seapress.”

Kern nodded, face lit from below, still watching the flitting ships. “Your brother's first battle,” he said quietly. “The beginning of the Reunification War.” He watched for a moment longer, then waved his hand, freezing ships in the air. Finally, he turned eyes on Dennison, who gave a perfunctory salute—really more a wave of the hand. Might as well establish what he was like from the beginning.

Kern didn't frown at the sloppy greeting. He folded his arms, regarding Dennison with a curious look.

“Dennison Crestmar. I hear you have something of a smart mouth.”

“It's the only part of me blessed with such virtue, I'm afraid.”

Kern actually smiled—an expression rarely seen on a High Officer's lips. “I suspect that was why your father sent you to me.”

“He has great respect for you, sir,” Dennison noted.

Kern snorted. “He can't stand me. He thinks I'm undignified.”



Dennison raised an eyebrow. When Kern said nothing more, he continued. “I feel that I must warn you, sir, that I am poorly suited to this commission. I doubt that I will fulfill your expectations of a squadron leader.”

“Oh, I don’t intend to put you in charge of any ships,” Kern said, laughing. “Forgive me, but I’ve seen your records. The only question is whether you’re a worse strategist or tactician.”

Dennison sighed in relief. “Then what are you going to do with me?”

Kern waved him forward. “Come,” he said, motioning with his other hand and restarting the hologram.

Dennison stepped into the hologram. He’d seen the battle before—one couldn’t graduate from the Academy without taking several courses on the mighty Varion Crestmar. Varion’s ships were outlined in white. He had two command vessels—one a simple merchant ship, the other his imperial longship—and he controlled only four dozen fighters. Fewer ships, even, than Dennison had been given to waste fighting pirates.

“Tell me about him,” Kern requested, watching Varion’s longship as it approached the battle.

Dennison raised an eyebrow. “Varion? He’s more than twenty years older than I. I’ve never even met him.”

“I’m not a parlor visitor, asking about your family, Dennison. I’m your commander. Tell me about Varion the warrior.”

Dennison hesitated. Varion’s longship, the famous *Voidhawk*, slid forward. Varion’s forces were laughably small compared to those of his enemy—the rogue planet of Seapress had boasted a fleet of five massive battleships and nearly a hundred fighters. Two decades ago, at the nadir of imperial power, such a fleet had been impressive indeed.

The Seapress ships, however, didn’t form up to attack Varion. They simply waited.

“Varion is . . .” Dennison said quietly. “Varion is perfect.”

Kern raised an eyebrow. “In what way?”

“He has never lost,” Dennison said. “He was given his first command the very day he left the Academy. Within five years, he had risen to command the entire Imperial Fleet, and was charged with regaining control of the Distant Sectors. He’s fought that war his whole life, and he’s never suffered a single failure. Hundreds of battles, and he’s never lost once.”

“Perfect?” Kern asked.

“Perfect.” Dennison said.

Kern nodded, then turned back to the battlefield. The blockish merchant ship had pulled ahead of Varion’s flagship, and was ponderously making its way toward the Seapress array.

“It all started here,” Kern said.



As the first in his class in the Academy, Varion had been offered positions aboard all of the grandest fleet flagships. He had turned them all down, accepting a lesser post aboard a ship commanded by a regular officer—one who wasn't noble. Article 117 of the Fleet Code allowed a High Officer to use his rank as a nobleman—rather than his military rank—to take command of any ships where a low officer was in charge.

It was an article rarely invoked, for if the nobleman fared badly, the emperor was permitted—even expected—to have the man executed.

Varion had used Article 117, taking command of the *Voidhawk* and its small fleet, the common captain becoming his XO. Varion's first action had been to ignore their standing orders, striking out instead toward the rebellious colonies on the Western Reaches.

"He actually took the merchant ship by force, you know," Kern said. "As if he were a pirate. I remember the High Emperor's fury. He ordered a half-dozen longships to hunt your brother down. But Varion's ruse wouldn't have worked otherwise. Seapress—like most of the rebel factions—had spies in the upper ranks of the Fleet. They had to believe that Varion was going rogue. That was why he seized command so rashly and why he captured a merchant vessel, then towed it to Seapress as a 'gift.'

"Nobody on his ship resisted him. That is your brother's most impressive attribute, Dennison. He's not just a tactical master. He's also an amazing leader. And an amazing liar."

The image of the merchant ship rocked suddenly, its engines blasting with unexpected strength. It gained momentum as the Seapress capital ships began to turn, their commanders confused, their own engines firing belatedly. The merchant vessel rammed the Seapress flagship, then both ships twisted and rammed into a second carrier vessel.

"He's also void-cursed lucky," Kern noted.

Dennison nodded as Varion's line burst with motion, fighters streaking away from his flagship, his smaller gunboats moving to enfilade the three remaining Seapress command ships.

Kern held up a hand, and the ships froze. He turned toward Dennison. "All right," he said. "Your turn."

Dennison frowned. "You want me to take command?"

Kern nodded, leaving the hologram and typing a few orders into the control panel. "Let's see what you can do."

Dennison raised an eyebrow. "What will that prove?"

"Humor me," Kern said.

The simulation began again. The massive Seapress command ship rolled weakly to the side, the hole in its side belching flames as oxygen escaped into the void. Seapress should have blown Varion from the sky the moment he entered their space. An Imperial Longship, with a commander fresh from the Academy,

committing treason? They should have seen through the ploy. But they hadn't. Somehow, Varion had convinced them.

Dennison shot a look to where Kern watched from the shadows. What did he see? A young Varion? Dennison and his brother were said to be very similar in appearance. The biggest difference was their hair: Dennison's was black, but Varion's had started turning a silvery gray on his twenty-second birthday. By twenty-five, he had already acquired the nickname "Silvermane."

"Launch the fighters in three formations," Dennison said, turning back to the hologram. "Order the *Darkstring* to mark 471 and tell it to hold position, firing on any ships that try to escape those wounded flagships. I want the *Fanell* to take up position to my lower port flank, then provide cover if any fighters get too close."

The battle began, and Dennison fought. As always, he tried. He tried hard. The insubordination and cynicism disappeared whenever he entered a battle hologram. Standing inside the fray, ships swarming around, above, and below him, he abandoned his habitual pessimism and really tried.

And he lost horribly. The Seapress ships cut down his fighters when Dennison failed to give them proper covering fire. He lost the *Darkstring* when the mortally damaged Seapress flagship rolled too close, then self-destructed. When he tried to retreat, enemy missiles tore out the back of his command ship, and left him to suffocate as life support fizzled. The hologram switched off.

Dennison sighed, turning back toward Kern.

"I've seen worse," Kern finally said.

"Oh?" Dennison said. "You've seen recordings of my Academy fights?"

Kern didn't respond. He stood, tapping his chin in thought. "You asked what you are doing here," he finally said. "Since you're not going to be given a command."

Dennison nodded.

"The High Emperor wants me to turn you into a leader," Kern explained. "But I don't intend to throw away any men on you. Therefore, I've found an instructor to train you."

"Who?"

"Your brother," Kern said. "Get used to this room, Dennison. You're going to be spending a lot of time here. I want you to go through every one of Varion's battles, studying his methods and his strategies. I want you to read every major profile written on him. You will become the Empire's foremost expert on Varion Crestmar—you will memorize and you will practice until you can fight this battle, and any other, just as he would."

"You're kidding," Dennison said flatly.

"You should get busy," Kern said, then tapped his control pad. A list of dates and battles appeared on the wall.

“You’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Lord Kern, Sir,” Dennison said, speaking with an attention to formality he rarely invoked. “I’m not my brother. I never will be.”

“That’s no reason not to try and learn from him.”

“He destroyed my life,” Dennison said. “From the first day I entered the Academy, I was fated to fail. How could I do otherwise, considering what others expected of me? Let me study someone else. High Admiral Fallstate, perhaps.”

Kern thought for a moment, then shook his head. “You’ll do as I order, son.”

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Each battle was a blow to his self-esteem. Even after studying Varion’s tactics, even after watching the battles replay over and over, Dennison had trouble winning. The simulator had a random factor in its programming so that he couldn’t just memorize and make the same moves that Varion had.

Dennison sighed, rubbing his forehead as he watched a holographic replay of his latest battle. His year aboard the *Stormwind* had passed quickly and with an odd sense of distortion. He felt removed from events in the Empire. His entire world was shrunken to an endless replay of strategies, tactics, and failures, centered around a single individual.

Varion.

The replay of Marus Seven continued. By this point, Varion’s fleet had grown to several thousand ships, and had official Imperial support. Varion hadn’t even been at this battle in-person; he had directed from his flagship many light-years away. The larger an object was, the longer it took to reach its destination via *klage*—so, while visual communications were essentially instantaneous, flagships could take months to travel between distant points of the empire.

These limitations frustrated Varion, so he had split his forces into two different battle groups, sending them in opposite directions. Dennison understood Varion’s reasoning now—a year of studying the Silvermane had immersed him in the worldview of a man he’d spent his life trying to escape. Who was Varion Crestmar? He was perfect. Dennison could no longer say that with even a hint of sarcasm.

Every day spent living his sibling’s life through battle brought the two of them closer. Dennison found himself spending his extra hours in the hologram room, looking over his recorded battles, then watching Varion’s handling of the same conflict. He stopped looking for the strategies and instead focused on the man. What kind of person was this Varion Silvermane? He had been separated from his family for two decades, living in glorious self-imposed exile because the war effort required all of his attention.

Many of these early battles in Varion’s campaign made perfect sense. Back then, Varion had still needed to persuade the emperor that he was worthy of trust and support. Dennison could see why the planet Utaries had

had to be crushed quickly, because of its ability to rally other planets to its cause. He could follow the logical connection between subduing the Seapress people, then moving onto the less-powerful—yet technologically superior—Farnight union.

As the Reunification War proceeded, however, Varion's choices grew baffling. Why had he gone after New Rofelos when doing so had exposed his forces to division? What had been the purpose of committing so many of his forces to conquering Gemwater, a planet of little strategic importance and even less military power?

Questions like these haunted Dennison. Varion's true genius was in his ability to connect battlefields, to lead his fleets from one victory to the next, always gaining momentum, expanding his war to second and third—then tenth and twentieth—fronts. He didn't just destroy or subdue, he converted. Before Varion's conquering began, the empire had barely held enough ships to defend its ever-shrinking border. By Marcus Seven, however, the fleet had contained more ex-rebel ships than official ones.

Varion was bold and daring, willing to take risks. Yet he was also lucky, for those risks always brought returns. Or, was it luck? Dennison's father would have scoffed. "Each man has responsibility for his own existence," would have been the characteristic pronouncement.

In the hologram, Dennison's flagship exploded in a spray of metal and light. Varion was perfect. And Dennison was perfectly incompetent. He didn't make this acknowledgement despondently or with self-pity. It was simply a fact. Varion had won Marcus Seven in barely two hours. The fiasco Dennison had just watched was a recording of his fourth attempt. He'd needed seven tries to win.

Dennison sighed, rising and leaving the hologram chamber. He needed to stretch. The lavish passages of the *Stormwind* were oddly empty, and Dennison frowned, walking along the carpeted corridor until he encountered a minor aide. The man paused briefly, saluting and showing the same discomforted confusion the junior officers usually gave Dennison. They weren't certain what to make of a High Officer who hadn't been given a command, yet was important enough to share dinner with Admiral Kern every evening.

"Are we in battle?" Dennison asked.

"Um, yes, sir," the younger man said quickly, eyes darting to the side.

"Be off with you then," Dennison said, waving the man away.

The junior officer eagerly dashed away. Dennison stood, frowning to himself. Had he really been so absorbed that he hadn't noticed the battle alarm? Not that Kern's flagship was really in any danger. This would be a minor battle; Varion's personal fleets handled all the serious fighting. Still, Dennison would like to have watched the fight. He headed for the bridge.

The *Stormwind*'s main bridge was larger than those of ships Dennison had commanded, but the central feature was still the battle hologram. Dennison left the lift, ignoring salutes as he stepped up the railing, looking down. Kern himself stood in the hologram, but said little. He was a traditional commander; he left most of the local decisions to his Squadron-commanders, who flew in smaller gunships or longships who

were in the thick of the battle.

Varion didn't use Squadron-commanders. He fought every battle himself, controlling each squadron directly. That would have been foolhardy for anyone else, but Varion did it with the aplomb of a chess master playing against novices. Dennison shook his head. *Enough of Varion for the moment*, he thought.

Kern's own battle didn't look like much of a fight. The High Admiral's ships outnumbered the opposition by at least three to one.

The battle progressed as expected. Dennison felt a longing as he watched, a wistfulness that he thought he'd quashed back in the Academy. His study of Varion was awakening old pains. He could almost feel the moves on the battlefield. When the squad commanders made their decisions—the orders manifest in the movement of the holographic ships—Dennison instantly knew which choices were better than others. He could see the majesty of the entire battlefield. Kern's forces needed to press to the northeast quadrant, drawing fighters away to defend their command ships so that the gunships to the south would fall. That would let Kern's superior numbers drain the enemy of resources until the rebellious group had no choice but to surrender.

Dennison could see this, but he didn't know how to accomplish it. As always, he grasped the concepts, but not the application. He was not a practical, hands-on commander of the type the empire preferred. It wasn't so odd. Dennison knew of men who loved music, couldn't play a note themselves. One could enjoy a grand painting without being able to replicate its brush-strokes. Art was valuable for the very reason that it could be appreciated by those of lesser skill. Remote leading and battlefield tactics were indeed arts, and Dennison would never be more than a spectator.

"Where are we, anyway?" Dennison asked an aide.

"Gammat system, my lord," the aide answered.

Dennison frowned, leaning down on the railing. *Gammat*? He hadn't realized that Varion had gotten so far, let alone Kern's mop-up force. He waved for an aide to bring him a datapad, then punched up a map of the empire and overlaid it with a schematic of Varion's conquests. He was amazed by what he saw.

It was nearly done. Varion's forces were approaching the last rebellious systems. *I really have been distracted lately*, Dennison thought. Soon there would be peace. And with that peace, commanders wouldn't be as important. They hadn't been during the Grand Eras.

Why, then, was it so imperative that Dennison be forced into Varion's mold? Everyone—the High Emperor, Kern, Dennison's father—acted as if Dennison's studies were absolutely vital.

It had to be his father, pleading for Dennison's continued training—not because it mattered to the empire, but because Sennion didn't want a failed warrior as a son.

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"Of course there will still be a need for commanders," Kern scoffed as a servant ladled soup into his bowl.

“What makes you think otherwise?”

“The Reunification War is nearly over,” Dennison said.

Kern’s dining chamber was a compact version of one in an imperial mansion back on the Point, complete with marble columns and tapestries. The High Admiral’s rank forbade his fraternizing with his other Sub-Commanders, but Dennison’s higher birth and relation to Varion Crestmar made him an exception. Kern seemed able to relax and dine with Dennison—as if he didn’t see him as an underling, but rather as a young family member come to visit.

Kern snorted at Dennison’s logic. “There will be insurrections for some time yet, Dennison,” he said, attacking his soup. Kern lived like an imperial nobleman, but he was far less reserved than most. Perhaps that was why Dennison got along with him.

“Yes, but Varion and his officers will be free to handle them,” Dennison said, ignoring his own soup.

“All men age, and new blood needs to replace them,” Kern said.

“The empire doesn’t need me, Kern,” Dennison said. “It *never* has. Only my father’s stubbornness keeps me here.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Kern said. “Either way, I have my orders. How is your training coming?”

Dennison shrugged. “I fought the Marcus Seven battle four more times today and lost twice. Still can’t win it consistently.”

“Marcus Seven,” Kern said with a frown. “You’re taking your time. At this rate, it’ll take you another year to get through Varion’s archive.”

“At least I’m not complaining any more.”

“No,” Kern agreed. “You aren’t. In fact, you actually seem to be enjoying yourself.”

Dennison took a sip. “Perhaps so. My brother makes for an interesting subject.”

“When you first came on board, I could tell you hated him.”

Dennison rested his spoon back in his bowl. “I suppose I did,” he finally said. “At the Academy, I was never given a chance to succeed—the other boys challenged me to battles before I was ready, each one wanting the prestige of defeating Varion’s brother. I became a loser before I could learn otherwise. I didn’t choose my path—Varion chose it for me. “But, now . . .” Dennison trailed off, then he looked Kern in the eye. “Could any man really hate him? How can you hate someone who’s perfect?”

Kern seemed troubled. Finally, he turned back to his meal. “At any rate, you should soon have a chance to meet him.”

Dennison looked up, surprised.

Kern took a sip of soup. “The Reaches are nearly subdued. In two months, Varion will meet with an Imperial Emissary on Kress, where they will hold a ceremony welcoming him back to civilization. You may attend, if you wish.”

Dennison smiled broadly. “I do,” he decided. “I do indeed.”

\* \* \*

Dennison was surprised by how bright the colors were. Kress was a sparsely inhabited world near the border of the Reaches. Its weather was obviously unregulated, for the wind blew strongly against Dennison’s face as he stood in the speeder’s door.

Dennison stepped onto the soft ground, sneezing and raising a hand against the bright sunlight. The vibrant green grass came up to his knees. What kind of world was this to greet a returning hero? A pavilion had been erected a short distance away, and Dennison made his way there. Here, at least, a local weather regulator had been set up, and the wind slowed as he entered the invisible confines of its influence. There, he unexpectedly found his father standing with a delegation of high-ranking ambassadors and military men. Sennion’s perfect white uniform was a pristine contrast to the wild lands around him.

*A small pavilion on a rural world? Why not meet Varion with the adoring crowds he deserves?*

Dennison could see a drop-ship descending through the wild air. He stepped up beside his father. Dennison hadn’t seen him in over six months, but Sennion barely nodded in acknowledgement. The drop-ship fell like flare. It plummeted, slowing only when it neared the ground, its plasma jets carelessly vaporizing the grass. The weather-sphere kept the wind of its landing from unsettling the pavilion’s dignified occupants. Dennison edged a bit closer to the front, waiting eagerly as the drop-ship doorway opened.

He had seen pictures of Varion. They didn’t do him justice. Pictures could not convey the confidence, the powerful presence, of a man like Varion Crestmar. With his silver hair and commanding eyes, he walked down the ramp like a god descending to the mortal realm.

When last seen on the Imperial Homeworld, Varion had been a smooth-faced boy. Now he bore the lines of combat and age; he was in the middle of his fifth decade. He wore an imperial uniform, but not one of a standard color. Dennison frowned. White was for nobility, blue for citizen officers, and red for regular soldiers. But . . . gray. There was no gray.

A group of officers walked down the ramp after Varion. Dennison recognized many of them. The woman would be Charisa of Utaries, a celebrated fighter pilot and squadron leader, one of the first rebel commanders who had joined Varion. The histories and biographies spoke often of her. What they didn’t mention was the way Varion rested his hand on her elbow as they walked forward, the way he watched her with obvious fondness.

To Varion’s right were Admirals Brakah and Terarn, two men who had been with Varion at the Academy, then



had requested assignment under his command. They were said to be his most trusted advisors. They walked behind Varion as he approached, walking with the sure step Dennison had imagined. Varion stopped just short of entering the pavilion.

Sennion Crestmar, High Officer and Imperial Duke, stepped forward to greet his son. “In the name of the High Emperor, I welcome you, returning warrior.” His words carried over the wind that still whipped outside the pavilion. “Accept this as a token of our esteem, and take your rightful place as the greatest High Admiral the Empire has ever known.”

Sennion extended a hand bearing a golden medal emblazoned with the double sunburst seal, the highest and most prestigious of the Imperial Crests.

Varion stood in the wind, looking down at the medal that swung from his father’s hand. He reached out, taking the award in his hand, then held it up before the light, dangling it before his eyes.

All were still.

Then Varion let the medal drop to the grass.

Sennion’s gun was in his hand in an instant. He pointed the weapon at his son’s forehead and gave no opportunity for retraction. He simply pulled the trigger.

The energy blast burst just millimeters before Varion’s face and then dissipated. The High Admiral hadn’t moved. He was unhurt, and apparently unconcerned.

Around Dennison, the pavilion’s occupants burst into motion. Flex-blasters and slug-drivers were pulled from holsters as men jumped for cover. Soldiers and officers alike drew. Dennison stood, immobile amid the yelling and the gunfire, and realized he wasn’t surprised.

*The greatest High Admiral the Fleet has ever known . . . perhaps the greatest commander mankind has ever seen. Of course he wouldn’t stop with the Reaches. Why would he?* Dennison’s father fired again, weapon held just inches from Varion’s face. Again, the blast evaporated, hitting some kind of invisible shield.

*This is no Imperial technology,* Dennison thought, stepping forward obliviously as others opened fire. Energy bolts and slugs alike were stopped by Varion’s strange shield. *Twenty years on his own, autonomous and unfettered by Imperial control. . . . Of course! He captured the most technologically advanced worlds first. That’s why some of those choices didn’t make sense. He was planning for this even back then.*

Men called for Dennison’s father to get out of the way. Some were firing at Varion’s officers, but they too had the strange personal shields, and they stood calmly, not even bothering to return fire. Dennison continued to walk forward, drawn to his brother. He watched as Varion reached down and unholstered his sidearm and raised it to his father’s head.

“You are no child of mine,” Sennion said, proudly staring down his son. “I disavow you. I should have done it twenty years ago.”

Dennison froze as Varion pulled the trigger. The duke's corpse crumpled to the ground, a few wisps of smoke rising from his head.

A wave of gun-blasts stormed from behind Dennison, ineffectively firing at Varion. The grass and earth before Varion exploded with fire and weapon blasts. Someone called for a physician.

Varion turned to regard the attack, raising a hand, waving his people back into the ship. Then he noticed Dennison. Silvermane stepped forward, carefully picking his way across the scarred ground. Dennison felt like scrambling back toward his speeder, but running would be useless. This was Varion Silvermane. He did not lose. People did not escape him. Those eyes . . . looking into those eyes, Dennison knew that this man could destroy him.

Varion stopped right in front of Dennison. The High Admiral's eyes looked contemplative. "So," he finally said, voice clear even over the gunfire and yells. "They *did* clone me. Well, the High Emperor will find that I am even capable of defeating myself."

He turned and left. Someone finally got a big repeating Calzer gun working, and it fired a blinding barrage of blue bolts. Varion's shields repulsed them. There should have been some blowback, at least, but there was nothing. Varion walked up the ramp to his ship as calmly as he had strolled down.

The Calzer soon drained the pavilion's energy stores, and the weather sphere collapsed, letting in the full fury of the winds. Dennison stepped forward through lines of smoke torn and then dispersed by the gale, ignoring the voices of angry, confused, and frightened men.

Varion's drop-ship blasted off, throwing Dennison to the ground. By the time his vision cleared, the ship was a dark speck in the air.

\* \* \*

"We knew he had *something*," Kern said, watching the holo for the tenth time. "But his shield. Where did he develop it? We put spies on each world. . . ."

"He brought them with him," Dennison said quietly, standing against the view railing.

"What?"

"The scientists," Dennison said from the side of the hologram room. "Varion doesn't trust anything he can't watch directly. He would have brought the scientists from Gemwater with him, probably on his flagship. That way he could supervise their work."

"Gemwater . . ." Kern said. "But he conquered that planet over fifteen years ago! You think your brother has been keeping secrets for that long?"

Dennison nodded distractedly. "He knew from that first battle at Seapress. He understood that by quelling the Reaches, he would make the High Empire stronger and harder to defeat when the time came. That's why he

took Gemwater so early, to give its scientists decades to build him secret technology.”

Kern watched the holo again.

The universe felt . . . awry to Dennison. His father was dead. Sennion Crestmar had never been loving, but he had instilled in Dennison a powerful will to succeed. He’d been demanding, rigid, and unforgiving. Yet, Dennison had hoped that someday . . . maybe . . . he would be able to make the man proud.

And now he never would. Varion had robbed Dennison of that.

*What does it matter?* Dennison thought. The hologram below showed the firefight through smoke and verdant grass. *Sennion wasn’t even really my father. I have no father. Unless Varion was wrong.*

No. Varion was never wrong.

Only two men could verify the claim for certain. The first lay dead from an energy blast to the head. The other —The High Emperor, who had to approve all cloning requests—had yet to respond to Dennison’s request for an audience. But Dennison knew what the answer would be. The saddest part wasn’t that Dennison was a fabricated tool, it was that he was a defective one. Genetically, he was the same as Varion. He had even checked in the mirror and found a few silver hairs. Varion had started to go gray at twenty-three—Dennison’s age now.

So many things made sudden and daunting sense. *You cannot be like other officers*, his father had said. *The High Empire expects more.* No wonder they had pushed Dennison so hard; no wonder they had refused to let him leave the service. He was Varion.

And yet he wasn’t. Whatever Varion had, it hadn’t been transmitted to Dennison. That confidence of his hadn’t come from a random mingling of chromosomes. The victories, the power, the sheer momentum. These could not be copied.

*The High Emperor will find that I am even capable of defeating myself.* Varion knew—knew that he was special, somehow.

“Dennison,” Kern said.

Dennison looked up. Kern sat below, in a chair just before the holo, looking up disapprovingly. He had paused the recording. The point he had inadvertently chosen showed a disturbing image. Varion’s weapon raised, smoking, a corpse falling to the grass below. . . .

“Dennison, I asked you a question,” Kern said.

“He’s going to win, Kern,” Dennison said, staring at the holo. “The empire . . . to Varion, what is the empire but another collection of recalcitrant planets to be brought into line?”

Kern glanced at the holo, and—realizing where he’d paused it—turned off the image.

“We are High Officers, Dennison,” Kern said sternly. “Such talk isn’t fitting.”

Dennison snorted.

“Varion *can* be defeated,” Kern insisted.

Dennison shook his head. “No. He can’t. And why should we bother, anyway? When does a man stop being a hero and start being a tyrant? If he had the right to bring the rebellious Reaches into line, then why shouldn’t he claim the same moral right regarding us?”

Kern frowned. “Only the planets that raided us were conquered—at least, at first, back when Varion was still nominally under control. This complete conquest of the Reaches was his own plan, done against the High Emperor’s wishes. By the time we realized our mistake, he was already too powerful. We really only had one option—gather strength and wait, hoping that he would be satisfied with taking the Reaches.”

Dennison shook his head. “If you hoped that, then you never really knew him. He is a conqueror, Kern. It’s like he feels some divine right to take the High Throne for himself.”

Kern’s frown deepened. He reached over, turning the recording back on. Once again, Dennison was confronted by the frozen image of his father dying, his brother . . . his other self . . . watching impassively.

“At least the High Empire believes in honor, Dennison,” Kern said. “Is there honor in that face? The face of a man who would slaughter his own father?”

Dennison glanced away, shutting his eyes. “Please.”

He heard the holo wink off. “I’m sorry,” Kern said sincerely. “Here, let me show you something else instead.”

Dennison turned back; the holo shifted to an image of Varion. This image, however, was in motion. Varion sat behind a broad, black commander’s desk, a small data pad in his hand.

“What is this?” Dennison asked, perking up.

“The feed from a bug we have in Varion’s study,” Kern explained. “Aboard the *Voidhawk*.”

Dennison frowned. “How—?”

“Never mind how,” Kern said. “This is our only bug feed of the *Voidhawk* that didn’t fuzz off within an hour of the incident on Kress. I doubt that Varion’s scanners caught the other twenty but missed this one.”

“He knows about it, of course,” Dennison said. “But why would he. . . .” He trailed off. Silvermane had left the bug because it amused him. Even as Dennison watched, Varion looked up—directly toward the ostensibly hidden camera—and smiled.

“That man . . .” Kern said. “He wants us to watch him, to know how unconcerned he is by our spying. He’s so arrogant, so certain of his victory. You would bow before this creature? Whatever the empire is now, it will be

worse with him at the head.”

Dennison watched Varion lounge in his study. *But I am him—an inferior knock-off, at least.*

Kern eventually snapped off the feed. “I’m giving you a sub-command, Dennison.”

Dennison frowned. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We have too many fighters and too few officers. The time for study is over.”

Dennison felt himself pale involuntarily. “We’ll be facing . . . him?”

“Just a minor battle,” Kern said. “A preliminary skirmish, really. I doubt Varion will even bother directing his side of it. It will happen some distance from the bulk of his fleet.”

Dennison knew Kern was wrong. Varion directed all of his battles personally.

“This is a bad idea,” Dennison finally said, but Kern had already turned back to his review of the Kress incident.

\* \* \*

“Yes, son. It’s true.” The emperor looked . . . weary.

“It’s illegal to clone a member of a High Family,” Dennison said, frowning as he knelt in front of the wallscreen image.

“*I am* the law, Dennison,” the emperor said. “Nothing I do can be illegal. In this case, the potential benefit of a cloning outweighed our reservations.”

“And I was that benefit,” Dennison said bitterly.

“Your tone threatens disrespect, young Crestmar.”

“Crestmar?” Dennison snapped. “Clones have no legal house or family.”

The High Emperor’s aged eyes flashed with anger at the outburst, and Dennison looked down guiltily. Eventually, the emperor’s voice continued, and Dennison was surprised at the softness he heard in it.

“Ah, child,” the emperor said. “Do not think us monsters. The laws you speak of maintain order in High Family succession, but exceptions can be made. It was your father’s stipulation in agreeing to this plan. Your right of succession was ratified by a closed council of High Dukes soon after your birth. Even had your father not required this, we would have done it. We did not create a life intending only to throw it away.”

Dennison finally looked back up. The weariness he had noted in the High Emperor’s face was evident again—during the last few years, the man had aged decades. *Worrying about Varion would do this to any man.* “Your majesty,” Dennison said carefully. “What if I had turned out as much a traitor as he?”

“Then you would have gone to war against him,” the High Emperor said. “For Varion would never be willing to share rule, even with himself. We hoped maybe you would weaken each other enough for us to stand against you. That, however, was a contingency plan—our first and foremost goal was to see that you did *not* turn out as he. It . . . seems that we were *too* successful in that respect.”

“Apparently,” Dennison mumbled.

“If that is all, young Crestmar, then I must be about the Empire’s business—as must you. The time for your battle approaches quickly.”

Dennison bowed his farewell, and the wallscreen winked off.

\* \* \*

Dennison paused in the doorway, the command bridge extending before him. This would be his first time commanding a real crew since he had begun studying under Kern’s direction.

The bridge of the *Perpetual* was compact, as one would expect from a ship of its class. Kern’s fleet had a dozen such minor command ships which traveled attached to the *Stormwind*. During a battle they were released and stationed across the battle space, allowing for a division of labor, as well as de-centralizing leadership.

The bridge was manned by five younger officers. Dennison realized with chagrin that he didn’t know their names—he had been too engrossed in his studies to mingle with the rest of Kern’s command staff. Dennison walked down the ramp toward the battle hologram. The officers stood at attention. There was something odd about their postures. With a start, Dennison realized what it was. None of them showed even a hint of disrespect. Dennison had come to expect a certain level of repressed scorn from those under him. From these men, there was nothing. No hint that they expected him to fail, no signs that they were frustrated at being forced to serve with him. It was an odd feeling. A good feeling.

*These are Kern’s men*, Dennison thought, nodding for them to return to their posts. *They’re not just some random crew—they trust their ultimate commander, and therefore trust his decision to assign me to this post.*

The battle hologram blossomed, and a crewman approached with a view-visor. Dennison waved her away. She bowed and withdrew, showing no surprise.

*They trust me*, Dennison thought uncomfortably. *Kern trusts me. How can they? Can they really have forgotten my reputation?*

He had no answers for himself, so instead he studied the battle space. Varion’s ships would soon arrive. His forces were pushing toward Inner Imperial Space, surrounding the High Emperor’s forces in an attempt to breach the Imperial line simultaneously in a dozen different places. Kern’s forces were arrayed defensively—a long, double-wave of ships positioned for maximum mutual support. Dennison and his twenty ships were at the far eastern end of the line—a reserve force, unless they were directly attacked.

As seen in the holo, Varion’s squadron suddenly appeared as a scattering of red monoliths disengaging from

the *klage*-dynamic. Their *klage* wouldn't have been very fast—only a small multiple of conventional speeds—because of the large command ships at the rear. When traveling together, a fleet could only move as quickly as its largest—and therefore slowest—ships.

Just a moment after the command ships disengaged from *klage*, fighters spurted from Varion's fleet toward Dennison's squadron. So much for staying in reserve. Dennison's hologram automatically zoomed in so he could deploy his ships. He had twenty fighters and the *Perpetual*, a cruiser which could, in a pinch, act as a carrier as well. Directly to port was the *Windless*, a gunship with less speed and maneuverability but greater long-range firepower.

Kern would make the larger, battle-wide decisions, and sub-commanders like Dennison would execute them. Dennison's own orders were simple: hold position and defend the *Windless* if his sector were pressed. Dennison's crew waited upon his commands.

"Expand hologram," Dennison said. "Revert to the main tactical map."

Two of the officers shared a look at the unconventional order. It wasn't Dennison's job to consider the entire battle. Yet they did as he asked, and the hologram zoomed back out to give Dennison a view of the entire battle space. He stepped forward—bits of hologram shattering against his body and reforming behind him—studying the ships in red. Varion's fleet. Though the Silvermane wasn't present personally, he would be directing the battle from across space. Dennison was finally facing his brother. The man who had never known defeat.

The man who had killed his father.

*You're not perfect, Varion, Dennison thought. If you were, you'd have found a way to bring our father to your side, rather than just blasting him in the forehead.*

Varion arranged his defense. Three prongs of fighters bracketing larger gunships formed the most direct assault in his direction. Something was off. Dennison frowned, trying to decide what was bothering him.

"Kern," he said, tapping a dot on the hologram, opening a channel to the admiral.

"I'm rather busy, Dennison," Kern said curtly.

Dennison paused slightly at the rebuke. "Admiral," he said, a little more formal. "Something is wrong."

"Watch your sector, Lieutenant. I'll worry about Varion."

"With all due respect, Admiral," Dennison said, "you just had me study this man for months on end. I know Varion Crestmar better than any living man. Are you sure this is the time to ignore my advice?"

Silence.

"All right," Kern said. "Make it quick."



“The orientation of his forces is odd, sir,” Dennison said. “His fighter prongs have been deployed to focus on the eastern sector of the battle. Away from you. But the *Stormwind* is by far the most powerful ship in this confrontation—stronger, even, than Varion’s own capital ships. He *has* to deal with you quickly.”

“He’s used this formation before,” Kern said. “Remember Gallosect IV? He focused on beamships first so that he could surround the flagship and take it from a distance.”

“He had 2-to-1 advantage at Gallosect,” Dennison said. “He could afford to expend fighters keeping the flagship busy. He’s too thinly extended to try that here—by pressing to the east, he’s going to expose himself to your batteries. He’ll lose capital ships that way.”

Silence.

“You wearing your visor, Dennison?” Kern asked.

“No.”

“I thought not,” Kern said. “Put one on.”

Dennison didn’t argue. The same aide walked back, proffering the equipment. Dennison slipped it on and saw a view from his fighter commander’s cockpit.

“Here,” Kern said, through the earpiece, no longer using an open channel. “Look at this.”

The right half of Dennison’s visor changed, showing a smaller version of the battle map. It was covered with arrows indicating attack vectors, and there were annotations around most of the vessels.

“What is this?” Dennison asked.

“Speak quietly,” Kern said in a whisper. “Not even my bridge officers know about this feed.”

“But what is it?”

“Intercepted *klage* communications,” Kern said softly. “This image is being sent from Varion to his commanders here. It’s how he commands—not verbally, but with battle maps outlining what he wants done.”

“You can intercept *klage* communications!” Dennison said quietly, turning away to muffle his voice. “How?”

“Varion wasn’t the only one who spent these last few decades working on technology,” Kern said. “We focused on communications and may have gotten the better end of the bargain, since it appears his shields are only effective on a personal scale. Our scientists developed a special bug that can work on a *klage* transmitter. The bug in Varion’s ready room, the one he thinks he’s so clever to have found, is just a red herring.”

“Can you intercept the responses from Varion’s commanders?”

“Yes,” Kern said. “But only if they come through the *klage* transceiver on the *Voidhawk*.”

“And could we change the orders he sends?” Dennison asked.

“The techs say they might be able to,” Kern said. “But if we do, we give away that we’ve been listening in. This gives us an edge. Read that map and tell me what you think.”

Dennison zoomed his visor in on Varion’s orders. They were succinct and clear. And brilliant. As the fighters engaged, he saw patterns emerge and interact. His brother made brave moves—daring, almost ridiculous moves. Here, a squadron of fighters was lured too close to another group. There, a gunship used its opponents as screens, keeping their cannons silent lest they destroy their own forces.

And he continued to push east. Varion didn’t explain himself in his transmissions, but after just a few minutes of watching, Dennison had confirmed his suspicions. “Kern,” he said quietly, drawing the admiral’s attention back from his command. “He’s coming for me.”

“What?” Kern asked.

“He’s coming for me,” Dennison replied. “He’s defeated every commander he’s ever gone up against—and now he has a chance for what he sees as the ultimate battle. He wants to fight himself. He wants to fight me.”

“Nonsense,” Kern said. “How would he know where you are? He doesn’t have our *klage* interception capability—of that, we’re as certain as we can be.”

“There are other ways to get information,” Dennison said.

He stood quietly for a moment. And then he felt a chill.

“Kern,” he snapped, “we need to retreat.”

“What?” the admiral said with frustration. He obviously didn’t like being distracted. “This whole battle is wrong,” Dennison said. “He’s planning something.”

“He’s *always* planning something.”

“This time it’s different. Kern, he wouldn’t expose himself to the *Stormwind* like that. Not even to get to me. We need to—”

A blast—sharp, shockingly loud—sounded in Dennison’s ear. He jumped, crying out.

“Kern!” Dennison yelled.

Chaos. Screaming. And then static. Dennison whipped off his visor, looking at his startled crew. “Raise the admiral!”

“Nobody’s responding,” said the comm officer. “Wait—”

“... Lord Canton from the *Stormwind* reserve bridge,” a voice feed crackled to life. “There has been an explosion on the main bridge. I am assuming command of the ship. Repeat. I am assuming command.”

*Kern!* Dennison thought. He spun, looking at the holographic projection of the *Stormwind*. An explosion on the bridge—sabotage? An assassin?

A shot sounded. Several of Dennison’s crew jumped—but this too had come over the comm.

“Lord Canton!” Dennison shouted.

Screams. Weapon fire.

He scanned the battle map. Kern’s forces were in chaos. Even within the careful structure of the imperial fleet, the loss of an admiral was devastating. Varion’s forces pressed on, ships darting, beamships firing. Pressing toward Dennison.

*Kern might still be alive.* . . . He thought.

No. Varion’s assassin wouldn’t fail. Varion wouldn’t fail.

“This is Lord Haltep of the *Farmight*,” a voice crackled over the comm. “I am assuming command of this battle. All commanders secure bridges! Squadrons six through seventeen, press toward the *Stormwind*. Don’t let the flagship fall!”

*That’s what Varion wants,* Dennison thought. *He presses east, creates a disaster on the flagship, then cuts us in two.*

This battle could not be won. It was hard to see, still—technically, they still outnumbered Varion’s forces. But Dennison could see the death of Kern’s fleet in the chaos of the battle space. Varion was control. Varion was order. Where there was chaos, he would prevail.

But what could Dennison do about it? Nothing. He was useless.

Except . . .

*I can’t let Kern’s fleet be destroyed. These men trusted him.*

“Open a channel to the commanders of every capital ship,” Dennison said quietly to his crew.

They complied.

“This is Duke Dennison Crestmar,” Dennison said, feeling a bit surreal as holographic ships burst and died around him. “I am invoking Article 117 and taking command of this fleet.”

Silence.

“What are your orders, my lord?” a stiff voice eventually asked. It was Lord Haltep, the one who had only just assumed command.

*These are good soldiers, Dennison thought. How did Kern, who seemed so relaxed about military protocol, command such respect from his men?*

Perhaps that was what Dennison should have been studying these last two years. Regardless, he had command. Now, what did he do with it? He stood for a moment, watching the battlefield in its chaos, and felt a twinge of excitement. This was no simulation. That was Varion, the real man, on the other side. This was what Dennison been created to do: To fight Varion, to defend the empire. Why else had he studied all those months?

*Why else did I study? So I could know that this battle was unwinnable. Our admiral dead, our forces divided. Varion would easily beat me in a fair battle.*

*And this one is far from fair.*

“All fighter squadrons to the eastern flank,” Dennison said.

“But the flagship!” Haltep said. “Our forces have regained control inside. They’re on the third bridge!”

“You heard my orders, Lord Haltep,” Dennison said quietly. “I want the fighters back, arranged in a tight aegis pattern.”

“Yes, my lord,” a dozen voices came through the com. Their fighters and beamships complied, pulling back into what was known as an aegis pattern—the fighters defending the larger ships at very close ranges.

Dennison lost some fighters as they broke off from the enemy. *Come on, he thought. I know what you want to do. Do it!*

Varion’s ships swarmed the *Stormwind*. It began to fire back, displaying awesome power, but without its own fighters, it was at a distinct disadvantage. Explosions flashed on Dennison’s hologram.

“All ships to dock,” Dennison said.

“What?” Haltep’s voice demanded.

“Varion’s fighters are busy,” Dennison said. “I want all fighters to dock in the closest command ship. The beamships can even take a few, if necessary. We only have a few minutes.”

“Retreat,” Haltep spat over the comm.

“Yes,” Dennison replied. *I’ve certainly had a lot of practice.*

It worked. Varion realized too late what Dennison was doing—he’d already committed to taking down the *Stormwind*. It wasn’t a mistake, but it was as near to one as Dennison had ever seen from his brother. Obviously he hadn’t expected Dennison to concede and run so quickly.

As the larger ships began to *klage* away, Dennison watched the *Stormwind* finally break, its massive hull

blowing outward from a ruptured core. Debris sprayed through his hologram as the mighty ship died.

*And so, I fail again,* Dennison thought as his own ship *klaged* away.

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Dennison strode down the walkway, clothed in a crisp white uniform. It bore no ornamentation—no awards, no badges of service, no indications of commissions fulfilled. His speeder sat cooling in the dock; he'd spent nearly a week in transit back to the Point, thinking about Kern's death and the loss of the *Stormwind*. Why did the admiral's death bother him even more than his father's had?

A squad of six armed MPs met him at the foot of the ramp. *Six?* Dennison thought. *Did they really think I'd be that much trouble?*

"Lord Crestmar," one of them said. "We're here to escort you."

"Of course," Dennison said. He walked, surrounded by soldiers, still lost in thought.

What would have happened if he'd fought his brother? He couldn't have won, but Kern likely hadn't believed he'd beat Varion either. Kern had fought, rather than giving up. Rather than running. Now he was honorably dead, while Dennison still lived.

Lived after invoking a near-forbidden article and forcing an embarrassing retreat. Men had been executed for less. Men had deserved execution for less.

The guards led him through four separate checkpoints. Dennison's trip home had been spent in near silence, with very little communication, so Dennison knew little of Varion's conquests during the last week. However, considering the events aboard the *Stormwind*, the extra security made sense.

His escort led him into a section of the imperial complex filled with bustling aides and officers. It was a testament to their worried state that not a single one paused to notice him, despite the color of his uniform and the crests that declared him to be an Imperial Duke. Crests that he probably wouldn't hold for much longer. After a few turns down hallways, the guards led Dennison to the Emperor's command center. They walked apart from him, so they didn't tread on the crimson carpet reserved for High Officers.

The soldiers at the door saluted, and Dennison's escort halted. "The emperor is inside, my lord," the lead MP said.

Dennison paused. This was looking less and less like an execution. Ignoring his pounding heart, Dennison walked into the command center. None of the guards went with him.

The first thing that struck him was the room's busyness. Ten huge viewscreens had been erected all around the chamber, and high-ranking officers stood before these, calling out orders. Aides and junior officers scurried about, and armed soldiers, their weapons drawn, stood in every corner of the room, watching the occupants with suspicion. Nearly everyone—guards and commanders alike—seemed haggard, their faces

drawn, their eyes red from stress and fatigue. The room was kept dim to make the glowing icons that represented ships more easily visible.

The viewscreens depicted ten different battles in ten different systems. Dennison caught a young officer's arm. "What is going on here?"

"The Silvermane," the woman said. "He's attacking."

"Where?"

"Everywhere!"

Dennison paused, letting the woman go. *Everywhere?* he thought, stepping forward. He recognized a few of the men giving orders. High Admirals, like his father. Scanning the screens, Dennison was able to piece together their situation. New Seele. Highwall. Tigtendow Prime. These were important core worlds, each home to an imperial fleet.

The emperor had moved his other fleets out to protect his borders. Dennison knew the numbers; he knew how many ships the navy had. If Varion took these worlds, there would be nothing left to resist him. The empire would be his.

"And he's fighting them all at once," Dennison said aloud, looking up at the screens. "He's controlling all ten battles at the same time."

An aging admiral—one Dennison recognized from his Academy days—sat in an exhausted posture in one of the room's many chairs. "Yes," the man said. "It's like we're a game to him. Defeating us one at a time isn't enough of a challenge. He planned it like this—he wants to destroy us all at once—to show us just how good he is. By the Seal, we never should have let him leave the Academy. We've doomed ourselves."

Dennison turned away from the screens. At the center of the room, on a platform elevated a few steps above the floor, the Emperor sat in a large command chair surrounded by ten smaller viewscreens showing the same ten battles. He was obviously making an effort to maintain an erect, confident posture—but somehow that only made him look wearier, like a warrior straining to bear armor that was too heavy for him.

Dennison stepped up to the chair.

"Dennison," the emperor said, looking at him with tired eyes, but smiling slightly. "You arrived just in time to watch your empire fall."

"I suppose executing me now would be pointless."

"Executing?" the emperor asked, frowning.

"For invoking Article 117 and losing a flagship."

The emperor sat for a moment, blinking. "Dennison, I was actually thinking of giving you a medal."

“For what, your majesty? Most flamboyant waste of half of a fleet?”

“For *saving* half a fleet,” the emperor said. “Lad, you have always been too hard on yourself. Varion was an optimist all through the academy; he believed that he could do anything. Why do you always assume that you are a failure?”

“I—”

“Varion struck six separate fleets the same day he attacked Kern’s,” the emperor said. “In each battle, he managed to assassinate the fleet admiral—and in four of the six cases, he killed the next man who took command as well. We still don’t know how he got so many assassins onto our bridges—you can see that we’ve had to take a number of precautions here on the Point.

“Regardless, of those six fleets, only *yours* escaped. Three of the fleets managed to disengage, but Varion chased them down and destroyed them. If you hadn’t abandoned the flagship as you did, you never would have been fast enough to get away.”

Dennison paused, then looked down.

“Even in victory, you doubt yourself,” the emperor said quietly.

“It’s no victory with Kern dead, your majesty.”

“Ah,” the emperor said, rubbing his forehead. He looked so exhausted. So worried. “Do you know what happens when a conqueror runs out of people to fight, Dennison?”

Dennison paused, then shook his head.

“It’s always the same,” the emperor mused. “Men like Varion cannot be content with peaceful rule. They make brilliant commanders, but terrible kings. His reign will be filled with unrest, rebellion, oppression, and slaughter.”

“You speak as if his victory were inevitable,” Dennison said.

“Do you honestly believe otherwise?” the emperor asked.

Dennison glanced back at the big screens. He could easily see why the emperor had set up this room. The threat from Varion’s assassins had required a single, secure command post—likely with backups, should this one be destroyed—away from the ships themselves. The men here would be blood loyalists of the emperor’s household. From this room, the Imperial High Admirals could command the ten separate battles and work for victory right under the emperor’s eyes. Unfortunately, they were losing. All of them.

*Such brilliance,* Dennison thought. *Like a master of games, sitting before his boards, playing ten opponents simultaneously.* Varion seemed to be most brilliant when he was stretched, and these ten battles must have stretched him greatly, because he was in rare form. He pressed his advantage on all ten fronts, and while the battles were by no means over, Dennison could see where they were headed.



“I can’t let you take command,” the emperor said.

Dennison looked back.

“If that’s why you came back to the Point,” the emperor said, “then I must disappoint you. I read our almost inevitable doom in these battles, and the men who fight them are good tacticians. Our best. I realize you must want to fight your brother, but we both know you don’t have the skill for it. I’m sorry.”

Dennison turned back toward the viewscreens. “I didn’t come to fight him, your majesty. I fled that opportunity.”

“Ah. Well, perhaps you will survive his attack, lad. In a way, you are his family. He might let you live.”

“As he let his father live?” Dennison replied.

The emperor did not respond. Dennison turned watch the screens, staring at Varion in his power, his perfection. “If he comes, I don’t want to live,” Dennison whispered. “He’s taken everything from me.”

“Your father and Kern.”

Dennison shook his head. “Not just that. He’s stolen my purpose. I was created to defeat him, and yet I am just as powerless as the rest of you. Nobody can face Varion. For the others, there is no shame in this—but *my* inability is a profound failure. I could have been him.”

“You don’t want to be that creature, Dennison,” the emperor said, shaking a weary head, leaning back. “What has his life been? Nothing but success after success. That has bred an arrogance that will kill him someday. Better to be the failure who nobly strived than the success who never really had to.”

Dennison closed his eyes. The words seemed foolish. Better to be Dennison the failure than Varion the genius?

*What could I possibly have that Varion does not?*

Dennison hesitated. Around him there were sounds—breathing, grumbling, called commands. One of the Admirals cursed loudly.

Dennison didn’t open his eyes. That Admiral’s curses—he knew what had caused them. “The battle for Tigtendow Prime,” Dennison said. “Varion just took the eastern fighter flank, didn’t he?”

“Actually, yes,” the emperor said.

Dennison stood with eyes closed. “On the fifth screen. He is pressing toward the gunships in the western screen-sector. He is taking them now, though moments ago they seemed safe. On the first monitor, he is pushing toward the flagship. It will fall within ten minutes. On the ninth screen, Taurtan, he is leading your fighters into a trap. They are being cut off somehow—I don’t know how, but I know he is doing it. They are lost.”

Silence.

“On the eighth screen, the planet Falna, he is collapsing the front line. After that, he will find a way to push the gunships into retreat, breaking their firing lines and opening the way for his fighters.”

“Yes,” the emperor whispered.

Dennison opened his eyes. “I don’t know *how* he will do these things, your majesty. That is the difference between him and me. Somehow, he can make his dreams into realities.” Dennison turned toward the emperor. “Do we still have the bug in Varion’s *klage* transmitter?”

“For all the good it does,” the emperor said. “We discover his orders only a few moments before they are carried out. Perhaps that has allowed us to survive this long.”

“Just before he died,” Dennison said, “Kern told me that you might have found a way to fake the transmissions coming in and out of Varion’s ship.”

“The long distance ones, yes,” the emperor said, frowning. “But it’s far better just to spy on him. If we started fabricating messages, it wouldn’t take long for Varion and his men to discover the trick. We’d trade a long-term tactical advantage for a few minutes of confusion.”

“Your majesty,” Dennison said, “there is no more long-term. If Varion wins this day, then we are all dead.”

The emperor’s frown deepened. He sat in thought for a moment, rubbing his chin. “What do you propose?” he finally asked.

*What am I proposing?* Dennison thought. *I’ve failed enough. Why pull the entire empire down with me?*

He started to tell the emperor he’d meant nothing by the comments, but something made him stop. Optimism and pessimism. He’d learned many things from watching Varion—tactics, strategy, how to manipulate a squadron. But it seemed he’d never learned the one thing that was most important.

Confidence.

“I’ll need a crew of technicians and aides,” Dennison said, “and these ten monitors beside your throne. Oh, and a tech who is familiar with that bugging system we have on Varion’s *klage*.”

The emperor continued to sit in his command chair for a moment, looking up at Dennison appraisingly. Then, surprisingly, he stood, calling to one of the admirals. A few moments later a young technician was ushered into the command center.

“You can hack the traitor’s *klage* data lines?” Dennison asked the thin man. “Sending false information to Varion’s ship?”

The technician nodded

“How long can you keep it up?” Dennison asked.

“It depends,” the technician said. “He has no reason to suspect a bug in his transmitter—he doesn’t know about the technology. But changing his information will create some interference that his technicians should notice and pick apart. If I’d have to guess, I’d say maybe a half hour or so.”

Dennison nodded thoughtfully.

“My lord,” the tech continued. “It won’t be a very useful half hour. We can send false messages in, and we can block the real transmissions from his admirals. But we can’t stop orders going out from the *Voidhawk*, so the nine other battle groups will soon realize Varion no longer knows what is truly happening, and is relying on bad information.”

“No matter,” Dennison said. “Prepare to hack the line. I want you to make it seem that the fleets in the other nine battles are doing exactly as I say. Instead of the real reports Varion’s commanders are sending, give him the fabrications I describe.”

The technician nodded, gathering a small crew and moving to a set of consoles at the side of the room.

“What good will this do us, Dennison?” the emperor asked quietly. “Buy us a little time, perhaps? Sow a little confusion?”

“Yes,” Dennison said. “Make certain your admirals make good use of it.”

“What of the tenth battle?” the emperor asked. “That’s the one where Varion himself commands in person. We can’t fool his own eyes—and that battle is happening the closest to the Point. If he wins there, he comes here, and none of our fleets will be able to stop him.”

Dennison turned, glancing at the tenth map. The *Voidhawk*, Varion’s own flagship, flew there in its glory. Dennison looked away from the ship, scanning the screen, searching for a particular squadron of fighters. They were always at the forefront of the battles where Varion himself was present. It was led by a particular pilot: the woman who had walked beside Varion on Kress.

Dennison walked over to the admiral who was contending with Varion in this tenth battle. “My lord, I need you to do something for me. Take five squadrons of fighters, and make certain to destroy *every single fighter* in that unit at mark 566.”

“Five squadrons?” the admiral asked with surprise.

Dennison nodded. “Nothing else is as important as destroying those fighters.”

The admiral looked questioningly over at the emperor, who nodded. The admiral turned to obey the order, and the aging monarch looked uncertainly at Dennison, who returned to his side. Then the emperor stepped aside, gesturing toward his command seat, which sat before the ten smaller screens. “You’ll need this.”

Dennison paused, then quietly sat down.

“I’m ready,” the technician said.

“Interrupt the feed,” Dennison said, taking a deep breath, “and show Varion exactly what I tell you.”

The man did so, and Dennison took control of nine battles. Or, at least, he took *fake* control of them. The blips on his screens became lies. Fabrications, sent to Varion as a poisoned gift of knowledge.

The knowledge of what it was like to be Dennison.

Varion swung his fighters toward the gunship position on the planet Falna, intending to push back the imperial line. In real life, that’s exactly what happened. However, in the simulation, Dennison made a few changes. One of the imperial ships got in a lucky shot, and Varion’s fighter line took a hit in just the wrong place. The fake imperial line rallied, destroying Varion’s ships in a way that was unlikely, but not unreasonable.

Dennison made such changes to each of the nine battles. Here, a squadron attacked at the wrong angle. There, a command ship’s engines failed at precisely the wrong moment. Individually, they were the kinds of small problems that happened in every battle. Nothing ever went *exactly* to plan. Yet all of these small bits of luck added up. As the nine conflicts raged in real life, Dennison sent Varion an increasingly invalid picture of his battle spaces.

Whatever Silvermane tried, it failed. Fighter squadrons collapsed. Gunships missed their targets and then were destroyed by a random stray missile. Command ships fell, and sectors were lost—all in a matter of minutes, and across all nine battles.

In Varion’s own vicinity, the five squadrons of imperial fighters did their job. The ships Dennison had targeted were gone in under a minute, though the major redirection of firepower left a hole in the central imperial line, making it collapse. Dennison paid no attention to that losing battle, or to the reports that the others were really faring far worse than his simulated victories. He even ignored the emperor, who called for a chair, then sat quietly beside him, watching his empire tumbling down around him.

Dennison ignored all of this. For a moment, he was perfect. He was Varion, his every effort rewarded. His hopes were truth. His commands matched his dreams. He was a *god*.

*So this is what it is like to win*, Dennison thought as his crew fabricated a victory for one of his squadrons, then sent it to Varion. *This is what it is like to expect to win. Is this really what he feels all the time? Is he so sure of himself that he sees his entire life as merely a simulation, played out exactly as he desires?*

*Well, for a few moments, he’ll have to live with being Dennison instead.*

Dennison made the tactical fabric of the conflicts collapse, caused Varion’s forces to be routed. The only battle Dennison couldn’t control was the one at which Varion himself was present. However, once the Silvermane was convinced he was losing in other parts of the galaxy, he began to make mistakes on his own front. He took more and more risks, struggling against the omnipotent force that was Dennison.

“Revenge,” the emperor whispered. “Is this what you wanted, Dennison? Is all of this about playing a last, cruel trick on your brother before he takes our empire from us?”

Yes, Dennison thought. *This* was his victory—his victory over Varion, his victory over a failed life. *This* was his moment: a perfect crescendo of battle, the entire universe bending to his will.

Then it ended.

“Someone must have noticed the bug!” the technician shouted as the viewscreens suddenly snapped back to the real battles. “The *klage* vibrations were a little irregular. I warned you!”

Dennison sat back in the emperor’s command chair, releasing the breath he’d been holding. The room was growing quieter—the ten admirals hadn’t gained much during their respite. *I’ve failed*, Dennison thought. The deception hadn’t lasted long enough—Varion would now know he’d been duped. His communications now secure, he would easily retake command of the other battles.

“What have you done?” the emperor asked Dennison with a haunted voice.

Dennison didn’t respond. He sat motionless, staring at the ten screens. For a moment he’d almost been able to convince himself that he *was* Varion. A victor.

“Your majesty!” a surprised voice called from the back of the room. It was the aging admiral, pointing at the screen. “Look! Look at the Silvermane’s forces. . . .”

In the tenth battle, the one that Dennison hadn’t been able to falsify, several of Varion’s fighter squadrons had turned away from their assault. Then *Voidhawk* itself broke off its attack.

“Your majesty, they’re retreating!” another admiral said with amazement.

The emperor stood, turning toward Dennison. “What . . . ?”

Dennison stood as well, stepping forward, toward the viewscreen. *Could it be. . .* If Varion’s technicians had found the discrepancy and fixed it on their own before telling Varion what was happening . . . extending for just a few moments the time in which Varion believed he was being defeated . . .

Dennison watched Varion’s forces retreat, and in that moment he knew the truth. He could see it in the organization of the ships.

He had won. His trick had worked. “In all the things Varion discovered or was taught,” Dennison said, a little stunned himself as he sat back in the chair, “for all his success, for all his genius, there was *one* thing he never learned. . . .”

Dennison paused, reaching over to his datapad and looking for a specific data feed. He clicked the button, bringing up an image on the main viewscreen: the imaged that showed Varion’s ready room via the bug that Varion had always known about. The bug that he had allowed to remain because it amused him. It showed exactly what Dennison had hoped to see.

There, presented on the enormous screen, was an image of the High Admiral. Lord Varion Crestmar the Silvermane, greatest military genius of the age, sat behind his desk in the *Voidhawk*. In his limp fingers he held a gun, a smoking hole blown through his own forehead.

“He never learned how to lose,” Dennison whispered.

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